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## DRAMA AND MUSIC

BERNSTEIN'S "L'ÉLEVATION."—THE LITTLE THEATRES AGAIN.—THE RED CROSS SET TO MUSIC.—NEW FRENCH AND AMERICAN COMPOSITIONS

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

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It seemed for a while, after M. Henri Bernstein had sent his latest play, *L'Élévation*, to the stage of the Comédie Française, where it has triumphed during many months, as if perhaps we were to see at last a war play touched with a penetrating sense of spiritual values. It was said in Paris that M. Bernstein had really turned this very formidable trick—although to do so he must needs have been born again artistically: for it was another Frenchman, Adolphe Brisson, who, writing in *Le Temps*,—with a passion of moral indignation worthy of Brooklyn or Boston or Montclair,—said that in Bernstein's plays "there is not a ray of sunshine over the mud; not a flower blossoming in the sewer: no ideal, no sacrifice: over all is the dull satisfaction of the appetites, wallowing in the dirt; death, nothingness." Which was taking the author of *Le Voleur* very seriously indeed—as if one should reproach Mr. George M. Cohan for not being poetical, or Sir James Barrie for not being "red-blooded." But after *L'Élévation* it was said that M. Bernstein had, amazingly, risen to the heights implied in his own title, and had produced a great war play. Since a time of war is a time when miracles come down upon the earth and play familiarly with common things—a time of spiritual transferences and inversions—who could have said, in advance of the event, that M. Bernstein had not shared in the general alteration? And now Miss Grace George has shown us *L'Élévation* in an English version at The Playhouse, where we can assess it for ourselves.

M. Bernstein aims to exhibit the ennobling effect of war

upon the three participants in that immortal trio of the sexes which sings its passionate dissonances even in a world under bombardment. Out of the slough of selfishness (his thesis is) war lifts us to the heights. It is a pity that from a score of available emotional hypotheses which might have revealed his moral, M. Bernstein should have been so unfortunate as to hit upon a series of dramatic postures which, though depriving him of his beloved *scène à faire*, supply no compensating illumination of his new-born idealism. The soldier-lover yields his mistress to her husband only upon his death-bed; his mistress agrees to return to her husband only when her lover is about to be denied her. A renunciation which merely says a pious amen to the enforced relinquishments of destiny leaves one somewhat unpersuaded of its transcendent spiritual valor. As for the beginning of Suzanne's ascent to The Heights, that is accomplished at the insignificant cost of deserting the husband who adored her, and who had condoned and even justified her unfaith. Suzanne, indeed, in her callous expression of preferences, reminds one of the remark of that most famous naturalist in contemporary fiction who, when urgently interrogated by a female relative as to why he did not take to matrimony, replied quite simply, "Because, my dear Mary, I prefer adultery." So it is with Suzanne. She and her lover are merely a pair of sanctimonious opportunists, sacrificing only what they were compelled by Fate to disgorge. Cartier, the admirable husband, is the only treader of The Heights in this psychic landscape.

M. Bernstein has deluged all the interstices of his dramatic action with a copious and effluvial romanticism that is shockingly out of keeping with the stark nobility and exaltation of his subject. Would a dramatist who had genuinely and profoundly felt the stupendous readjustments of war permit himself to debase so great a theme as that which is exhibited in his second act—the antique and simple theme of the creative potency of belief and faith—by exploiting its merely sentimental implications to make a theatrical deathbed holiday? And yet, for all its shoddy emotionalism, M. Bernstein's drama is the only play that has come to us this season which even attempts to observe and estimate the spiritual precipitations of the War; and for that reason there can be nothing but thanks for the enterprise of Miss George in bringing to pass its American production—

especially since it permits us to watch Miss George herself in the accomplishment of the most beautifully reticent and affecting piece of histrionism that the New York stage has seen in a good many months. Being offered a hundred incentives to exuberant clamancy, Miss George has quietly ignored them all, and has contented herself with a sustained and exquisite indication of character and mood.

WE do not know if Professor Brander Matthews would grant wisdom to the æsthetic dicta of Mr. George Moore. We are inclined to doubt it. Therefore Professor Matthews must forgive us for saying that a sentence in his article, "The Case of the Little Theatres," in last month's REVIEW, reminded us, by inversion, of Mr. Moore. Professor Matthews objects to certain plays produced by the Little Theatres on the ground that they were "unduly sombre." It was this sentence which reminded us of Mr. George Moore. Professor Matthews justifies his regret by citing with warm approval Matthew Arnold's quotation of Schiller's assertion that "all art is dedicated to joy, and there is no higher and no more serious problem than to make men happy; the right art alone is that which creates the highest enjoyment"; and Professor Matthews complains that "only too often . . . the Little Theatres force their audiences to take their pleasures sadly." It was here that we remembered Mr. Moore and his remark that "the sadness of life is the joy of art."

We would suggest that between Schiller's dictum and Mr. Moore's there is no antagonism. We hesitate to believe that Professor Matthews really supposes that what Schiller meant by the "joy" which it is the supreme function of art to exert is the kind of joy which is so successfully diffused by the riant gorgeousness of that dazzling child of Messrs. Dillingham and Ziegfeld, *Miss 1917*. We dare to hint to Professor Matthews that there are dour souls who obtain more "joy" from *Macbeth* or *L'Intérieur* than from *Polyanna*: that there are sodden spirits for whom that problem which, says Schiller, is surpassingly high and serious: namely, "to make men happy," is more nearly solved by *Boris Godunoff* than by *Hitchy-Koo*.

So we wish that Professor Matthews had not counted it against the Little Theatres that some of their plays were "unduly sombre." To us it seems rather that the most

treasured achievements of the Little Theatres as we have known them in New York (this deponent has had no experience of them in other American cities) have been precisely in their commerce with those plays in which "the angel of the darker drink" broods above the destinies of the play and colors the souls of its characters with tragic beauty or tragic terror, or the immitigable loneliness of the human heart, or the estrangements and defeats and terminations of the spirit. The Little Theatres of New York have never so richly justified themselves to certain of their friends as in their sometimes inexpert, but, at their best, their finely sympathetic, interpretations of such "sombre" plays as *L'Intérieur*, *Aglavaine et Selysette*, *La Mort de Tintagiles*, *The Life of Man*, and *Bushido* (as done by the Washington Square Players); *The Glittering Gate*, *A Night at an Inn*, and *The Queen's Enemies* (as done at the Neighborhood Playhouse); and *Cocaine* (as done by the Provincetown Players).

Professor Matthews has something to say in his article about the enmity of the "commercial" stage in America toward plays of a finer grain than those which are competent to soothe or excite Broadway; and he perceives that only in the Little Theatres, by reason of their peculiar relation to their publics, can such plays hope to emerge. Yet he reproaches the Little Theatres because they "too often . . . force their audiences to take their pleasures sadly." The obvious answer is that, for the undauntedly eupeptic, there is always the Elysium of the "commercial" theatre, where they will find certain and eternal shelter from such sharp affronts to sunniness as *L'Intérieur* and *The Glittering Gate* and *Cocaine*. Doesn't Professor Matthews see that it is unhandsome of him to extoll the Little Theatres for their hospitality to plays that are "deficient in universality of appeal," and then scold them for exercising their special function in the case of that type of play for which they are the one and only refuge? For if plays like *L'Intérieur* are to be shut out from the Little Theatres because they remind Professor Matthews too painfully that life is somewhat less than Arcadian, where in the name of Aristotle are they to find sanctuary?

We hope that the directors of the Little Theatres will not be cast down by Professor Matthews's accusation that they are unduly sombre, and that they will not be fright-

ened thereby into producing too many things like *The Avenue*: "a comedy of New York," which the Washington Square Players include in their current bill. This is an exudation of the kind of tedious and witless "joyousness" which makes a man a misanthrope for life. It is the kind of thing which the Washington Square Players have done too often in their latter days. It has frivolity without humor, lightness without distinction. It is a thousand miles away from the sort of comedy which the Players have in the past accomplished with so true a distinction. Nor have they been happy in their choice of the other plays on their new bill: a heavy-handed attempt to make dramatic capital out of the suppressions of the New England soul, eked out by an unimaginative use of supernaturalism; and a sea tale, *In the Zone*, which left one curiously at ease in the midst of threatening submarines and the wreckage of a life Cursed by Drink. It is a pity that in choosing a play by Jacinto Benavente, the Players hit upon the least interesting of those which Mr. John Garrett Underhill has lately translated from the Spanish: *His Widow's Husband*. This (at least in the version to be seen at the Comedy) is disappointingly thin and banal.

If we have not hesitated to confess an incomplete satisfaction in the latest offerings of one of the Little Theatres, it is merely because the best that they have given us is by no means easy to forget. They themselves have forfeited immunity from exacting appraisal by their sincerest friends.

Writing in these pages, in the comparatively tranquil month of April, 1916, we wondered why it should not be possible for the art of music to reflect the nobler emotions of war—the pity and sorrow, the exaltation and sacrifice that flow out of it—as deeply and beautifully as poetry has reflected it in the last sonnets of Rupert Brooke. We said then that music had not yet given us the kind of war-inspired emotion and war-inspired beauty that poetry has given us in *The Soldier* of Brooke. Since then we have been curious to see in what way, if at all, the art of music would react to a war of incomparable magnitude and inescapable dominance: and when we heard that Professor Horatio W. Parker had written a work for contralto and orchestra called *The Red Cross Spirit Speaks*, to words by Dr. John H. Finley, we confess to having awaited its performance with

a measure of expectation only a little modified by dubieties which it would be ungracious to remember if, in the event, they had not been unhappily justified.

Mr. Damrosch gave the work at a concert of the Symphony Society in Carnegie Hall on November 10th, with Mrs. Homer as the singer; and a highly dramatic and vivid exhibition it was, by singer, orchestra, and conductor. Professor Parker and Dr. Finley were in no respect betrayed—they were, indeed, glorified beyond the merits of their deeds. It is a thousand pities that Dr. Finley's altogether creditable admiration for the work of the Red Cross did not find issue in words more richly suffused with eloquent emotion; for then Professor Parker would not have had to face the task of setting music to such lines as these:

I am *you*, doing what you would  
If you were only where you could.

It is surprising that he has done as well as he has with the material provided by Dr. Finley. Poetic banalities remain, of course, poetic banalities, whether they are glorifying the Red Cross or God or Peter Bell; and the strain on Professor Parker's presumable affection for these verses must have had its dangerous moments.

There are better things to do for the Red Cross than to set it to music, unless you can be reasonably sure that you have chosen a poetic accomplice who will not depress an inherently exalted theme, or—failing that—unless you have excellent grounds for believing that you are able to transfigure verbal earthiness. If we are going to capitalize æsthetically the sublimations of war, it will enormously assist the courage and faith of those who hope for the survival of invaded spiritual territories if this particular task is left to poets, artists, and music-makers whose imaginations are of demonstrated caloric intensity.

And even then we shall not be sure of our reward, if we must take warning from the sort of thing that seems to have happened during the War to men of the rarest and most indubitable genius. What, for example, has occurred within the soul of Claude Debussy that, in the midst of a France convulsed, he can bring himself to publish such trivial stuff as his new sonata for violin and piano (the copyright date on the score is 1917) which Mr. Eddy Brown recently played in New York for the first time?

Through this prettily feeble music float the emaciated wraiths of once lovely presences—w weary ghosts from the wonderworld of *Pelléas* and *Ibéria*, and even less patrician ghosts: ghosts who belong on the estates of Grieg and Puccini. It would be hard to choose between this gracefully impotent production and Debussy's trite and vacuous *Noël des Enfants qui n'ont plus de maisons*, of which we wrote in dejection a year and a half ago. If the War has thus lamentably disabled his spirit, those who in the past have most deeply felt the unique power of Debussy's genius cannot but pray that he will never write again.

It is a relief to turn from such writing as this of Debussy's to some music that we have lately had from American hands. That fact in itself is worth celebration: for it is a sufficiently startling experience to find oneself discovering triviality and tepidness in a modern musical Frenchman, and gravity and passion in an American: yet that is what results if one sets the new piece of Debussy's that we have been discussing alongside of Mr. Henry F. Gilbert's symphonic prologue to Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, which Mr. Stransky and the Philharmonic Society played to their New York audience several weeks ago. The difference is that Mr. Gilbert has really had some inward tension to discharge; and he has stopped when that discharge was accomplished. It is just as obvious that Debussy was merely making music for violin and piano. He could have spun out indefinitely the kind of sophisticated prettiness that fills the three movements of his sonata, which does not at any point explain why it was written. That is to say, Debussy's piece belongs to an order of music which even the greatest masters have put forth by the yard; there is a vast quantity of it signed by the most exalted names in the records of the art. Debussy's sonata is no worse, for example, than some of the piano sonatas of Mozart. One might call it "unnecessitated music," and let it go at that. Mr. Gilbert's is of the kind that was clearly necessitated. One knows that he was compelled to set down this music. We have no intention of implying that it wholly satisfies us as a commentary upon Synge's play—for it is neither bitter enough, nor tragic enough, nor terrible enough; nor that it satisfies us *qua* music—for it is wanting in profile and saliency and projective skill. But it is an uncommonly sincere and honest declaration, made because it had to be made.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.